

From Hyperlink to Ink: Media Tactics and Protest Strategies of the UK Radical Environmental Activism Movement

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Abstract:

In a socially mediatised world, why do some environmental activists movements still think in terms of front page newspaper coverage? The movements' over reliance on social media as a media tactic, over time negated any genuine political strategy. Environmental activists and the traditional media have discovered there is a need to concentrate less on virtual and more on physical communities. Activists should concentrate on online tools, to get people off line, just as activists should know where and when to use technology. But, any media tactic is worthless, without a political strategy in which to hang it on.

Key words: social media, environmental activists, political strategy

“Whenever we think of an action, we envisage what it will look like on the front page” [sic] –Eco-activists Dan Glass, 2011.

Introduction

In a socially mediatised world, where twitter, Blackberry messaging (BBM), Facebook, the Internet, blogs, World Wide Web, open source, Wiki's and websites can make anyone a producer and consumer of news, why do some environmental activists movements still think in terms of front page newspaper coverage? Why engage with traditional¹ media (as the quote above shows) when there are other ways to influence public opinion? After decades of viewing journalists and media houses as the fourth estate, many contemporary environmental activists now hold a belief that “it was a mistake to reject the possibility of strategically using the mainstream media outlets to promote our ideas and tackle head-on the discourses of politicians, corporations/recipients of such media coverage to think differently outside their own comfort zone” (CSC, 2005:322). Like the direct action that marked out the early days of Greenpeace, post-2005 UK based eco-activist collectives such as Plane Stupid, Camps for Climate Action (known as climate camp henceforth), So We Stand, Climate Rush, and others are actively engaging with traditional media.

One example, Plane Stupid, are an eco-activists group that target airport expansion and pollution, and are renowned for their media tactics (Doyle, 2009, Gavin, 2009). Their media policy had ranged from a television advert with polar bears falling out the sky²; activists Dan Glass super-gluing himself to British Prime Minister, Rt Hon. Gordon Brown, MP (July 22nd 2008), and their activists protesting against a proposed third Heathrow runway, on the roof of Westminster Palace (February 27th 2008). Such actions are in addition to established repertoires of contention (direct action, marches, targeting of companies, chaining oneself to inanimate objects, climate camps, etc.). Each action has one objective - front page coverage. Through meticulous media tactics, aligned with a protest strategy, collectives such as Plane Stupid design deliberate and calculated media tactics that target front page coverage.

This paper will draw on original empirical data³ with examples from activist collectives such as Plane Stupid⁴, the Camps for Climate Action⁵; Reclaim the Streets⁶, VisionON.TV⁷, London Rising Tide⁸, So We Stand⁹ and HACAN¹⁰ to examine: 1) why have contemporary activists developed media strategies that still think in terms of traditional media? 2) What effect

¹ This paper will use the term ‘traditional’ media when referring to print and broadcasting journalism. Occasionally the term is called mainstream media in quotes, and refers to ‘traditional’ media.

² See <http://www.planestupid.com/polarbears> for more information (accessed January 2012)

³The method for choosing each participant³ was based on those activists either quoted directly or indirectly by the traditional media.

⁴ Plane Stupid is a network of grassroots groups that take non violent direct action against aviation expansion (see <http://www.planestupid.com/aboutus> for more information)

⁵ The Camps for Climate change ran from 2006-2010. They were weeklong camps, workshops, and direct action aimed at raising awareness about climate change (see <http://climatecamp.org.uk/about> for further information)

⁶ Reclaim the Streets (RTS) were a collective aligned to the rave and free music scene, with an environmental focus.

⁷ VisionON dot TV(<http://visionon.tv/mission>) aims for the widest possible distribution of video for social change by creating social media toolkits around this content so that real communities of action can be built.

⁸London Rising Tide takes direct action on climate change, to promote ecological alternatives to reliance on fossil fuel consumption

⁹ So We Stand is an environmental justice collective to support communities living in high emissions areas (for example near to power stations or airports), and other areas of environmental injustice.

¹⁰ Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (HACAN)

does front page coverage have on the politics of environmental activism? And 3) does social media open-up any opportunities for genuine knowledge exchange between environmental activists and journalistic language? To examine why activists are returning to supplying traditional media when they have a plethora of alternative media platforms, this paper will draw on the example of the 2007-2010 Climate Camps. The paper is divided into three sections. The first section will examine why activists believed they had to re-engage with traditional media. The middle section looks at the impact of change on relations between journalists and activists. The final section examines if there are any consequences of returning to a “media-centrism” (Sobieraj, 2011:16) strategy, in view of social media and internet developments.

Re-engaging with traditional media practices

Early studies (Holloway, 1998, Marshall, 1994) show that during the anti-roads movements some activists began “to grow disenchanted and disillusioned with the mass media” (Marshall, 1994). Many protestors felt manipulated by journalists to increase the news value of the protest -“They very often expect us to perform... for the sake of providing them with a little bit of footage. In many cases, I have been to protests where the media even position people saying ‘no, no, no you stand over there, this is what you say!’” (Marshall, 1994). Marshall’s finding echo those of Debord in his seminal work ‘The Society of the Spectacle’ (2000). Debord notes the objectives of the protests are often juxtaposed with an examination of wider social issues. In other words, the media use the spectacle of the protest as a counter point to the hegemonies position.

Whilst some in the Reclaim the Streets collective had “a policy of no contact with the media at all...there was officially no contact with the media” (interview with activists Michael), others met with journalists from national UK newspapers. This ‘insider-outsider’ distinction developed in an earlier period of pressure group politics (Grant, 2005) extends to the relationship with traditional media. However, in light of social media, such today’s environmental activists understand that a “self-imposed isolation”, a tactic of non-interaction with the mainstream media, was a “luxury that we [activists] could not collectively afford” (CSC, 2005:322).

Hutchins and Lester (2009) show that rather than challenging the protesters’ need for access to traditional forms of new media, websites and the web provides an opportunity to “bypass corporate, multinational media” and to “become another device in the strategic toolbox of the environmental movement for gaining mainstream news media access” (2009:580-581). A simple website is easy to produce and with little need for any “formal organisation behind it...used as a node for organising protest campaigns” (Tarrow, 2009:137). The internet and World Wide Web provide an alternative to engaging directly with traditional media. Access to social media means some collectives can return to early media tactics, and still provided a direct voice for activists through blogs, websites and citizen journalism. At the climate camps, documentary maker, Hamish Campbell at VisionON.tv website encouraged activists to produce their own news media. Anti-aviation expansions collective, Plane Stupid’s communication strategy uses websites to provide journalists with direct access to protesters. Doyle (2009) observes how Plane Stupid’s website “constitutes its action...the website is action orientated...alongside press releases” (Doyle, 2009:113). For example, during the Westminster Palace roof protest, Plane Stupid provided the mobile phone numbers of the activists on their homepage. Thus journalists could speak directly to activists and bypass traditional gatekeeping practices.

The effect is to create “new hybrid forms of media consumption-production which challenge the entrenched division on labour (producer vs. consumer of media narratives) that is the essence of media power” (Couldry, 2003:45). For example, the Climate Camp began to

create “new hybrid forms of media” with a media tent, a journalist ‘open hour’, and a set of rules, to become their own gatekeepers by exploring the “emancipatory and democratizing potential of new media technologies” (Hutchins and Lester, 2009:581). In light of the opportunities to bypass traditional media then why do more contemporary collectives actively choose to engage with journalists?

Today environmental activist plan and organise protest as an image event by giving reporters direct access to ‘action’ through, their websites homepage, texts, social networks and citizen journalism. Yet, despite the open source opportunities, social media means activists can circumvent traditional media. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter shows, activists still devise tactics and media strategies to gain front page coverage.

Activists desire to gain front page coverage is a departure from the earlier relationships with journalists. The move to engage with journalist is a change from the outright rejection in the past, when journalists were predominantly viewed as the fourth estate. As the earlier discussions in this paper show with Marshall’s study, activists have purposefully distanced themselves, or felt manipulated by traditional media. Indeed, the more anarchic elements of the 2009 summer climate camp had ‘No Media’ signs on the outside of their tents, especially the anarchist collectives. In general, the climate camps took engagement with journalists’ one step further by devising an entire media strategy that became problematic to the movement. The introduction of a media team and spokesperson, led to an informal hierarchical structure that shaped power structures and divided the camp. There were already tensions in the camp over allowing guided tours for journalists. . The internet and World Wide Web may have opened up new media platforms, but have also created divisions between the ‘older’ activists and ‘new’ activists. Saunders and Price (2009) note “within the [climate] camp, the main tension is between the *ideal* anti-authoritarian *self* and those more sympathetic to corporate – or state led solutions” (Saunders & Price, 2009:118). Whether to engage or negate the traditional media is a source of division in most environmental collectives.

A media tent and gatekeeping tactics led to the creation of a brand- “climate camp, the institution” (Beaumont, 2009:27); and removed any autonomy for the activists as the media team became ‘spokespersons’ for the camp. Thus in- engaging with traditional media for front page coverage, activists had to accept and engage with traditional media practices, such as a media team. Climate camp activists also found that social media created as many problems as the publicity it generated. A consequence of such desire for front page coverage was the loss of autonomy for the climate camp activists or any acknowledgment of history.

The Impact of Change

Front page coverage did generate more column inches, it also removed the purpose of the climate camps and environmental activists’ politics from the media coverage. Wider debates on environmental discourse were lost in a language of parties, festivals and ‘youth’. This section looks to these consequences of developing media tactics that target the front page.

The Heathrow climate camp as a “watershed moment” (interview with John, August 2011) because it highlighted the states and business role in environmental discourse. The second climate camp at Heathrow, (2007) was seen by some activists as a successful camp¹¹

¹¹ Following the 2010 general election all plans for a third runway were shelved

Climate Camp only really had two things that I would call a success. That's not to say that there weren't other good things that came out of the two successes of it, and one is that, was Heathrow, 'cos I don't think any of the other camps, none of them achieved their day of actions, none of them were long-lasting, none of them were engaged with the local community beyond the actual week of the camp and some of them more likely did more damage than good in that sense". Erm, and the other thing is that between Drax and Kingsnorth, I think it really did transform the discussion and the narrative of media around environmental and climate change issues (Nim activists from So We Stand, interview August 2011)

Yet journalists still depoliticalised the camp as "the cheapest- and chic-est-date in the summer festival calendar" (West, 2009:30) as protesters are "nice, white and middle-class...students who have made their way to Blackheath via a summer of Glastonbury, Inter-railing, camping in the south of France" (Fryer, 2009), as the camps "looks more like a gentle middle-class festival than a political training camp" (Fryer, 2009).-

Consequently, the front page coverage of the Heathrow Climate camp, led to a wave of new activists and interested people that had little interest in the politics of environmental discourse. The increased media coverage did led to front page coverage, but at the cost of objectives, and debates on wider political engagement with environmental discourse.

Consequently media tactics that targets front page coverage has in this case resulted in a loss of autonomy and objectivity for the protest. The focus on media attention also led to loss of objectives which led to the branding of climate camp

Social media provides a platform of "horizontal communication networks and mainstream media to convey their images and messages" (Castells, 2009:302). The result is environmental activists can "increase their chances of enacting social and political change- even if they start from a subordinate position in institutional power, financial resources, or symbolic legitimacy" (Castells 2009:302). Contemporary, environmental activists realise there's a need to combine earlier media tactics (i.e. Greenpeace and Greenham Common Peace Camps), with the "collective learning via tactical experience" (Anderson, 2004:19). However, activists also realise that websites, social media and the World Wide Web is just one solution to influencing media coverage. The web is not a solitary force for mobilising new political forms, but a factor, and "success is conditioned by many factors that have little to do with the internet "(Gavin, 2009:130). Journalists and activists use of "the web is only trusted as an impartial source by 1 percent of the population (Worcester & Mortimer, 2001:15), and certainly by fewer than trust the conventional media" (Hargreaves and Thomas in Gavin, 2009:132).

Gavin (2009) observes that if traditional media sees the web as an add-on "an alternative transmission mechanism for these media, which are far and away the public's most trusted and most often used source of political information. This perspective sees the web as adjunct to conventional sources, rather than as an additional one" (Gavin, 2009:136). Moreover, in a time-conscious environment the media, rely heavily on PR sources, and it could be extended to relying on protest websites-as "The pressure placed on them [journalists] to produce additional web-based copy alongside conventional packages – with fewer resources and a in finite amount of time- can lead to a dependence on readily available PR sources that, some argue, compromises the quality and integrity of the resultant coverage" (Gavin, 2009:136). Thus, the internet and various sources on the web "does not in itself constitute usable information, any more than usable information constitutes a contribution to knowledge or to rational debate" (Gavin, 2009:138)

Activists have come to realise that in order to influence the front page, they need to “concentrate less on online communities and realise that we are communities ourselves ...do more face-to-face stuff and, whatever means necessary, we are going to go to the actual mainstream media” (interview with Steve, August 2011). It can be used to be a parasite on the traditional media, but is equally too limiting in its range of demographics, and who it reaches. Hence in aiming for the front pages activists can widen their demographics, move on from ‘the converted’ and utilise both repertoire of tactics and new media. Thus social media should be a tool to facilitate a tactics not strategies.

Conclusion

The movements’ over reliance on social media as a media tactic, over time negated any genuine political strategy. Environmental activists and the traditional media have discovered there is a need to concentrate less on virtual and more on physical communities. Activists should concentrate on online tools, to get people off line, just as activists should know where and when to use technology. But, any media tactic is worthless, without a political strategy in which to hang it on.

The internet has meant activists were wedded to the spectacle, focusing solely on media tactics, and consequently forgetting the objective for much of their protest. Slowly over time as Plane Stupid were planning how to superglue Dan Glass to the Prime Minister, or Climate camp were busy planning the annual event, it slowly turned into a brand, the very corporate-led solutions they were originally protesting about. The focus on the front page meant the movement lacked any political discourse or objective to challenge. Unlike the early movements whose desire to protest came ahead of the media strategy. Today’s collectives think of a media strategy first and make the protest fit! As the older activists observe, there needs to be a return to tactics and planning, to face-to-face meeting, organised via social media, but not dependent on how many hits, tweets or Facebook ‘likes’ are a measure of success. Doherty had a valid point, that success shouldn’t be measured by mediatisation (cited in Seel *et al*, 2000). Activists need to retain their ‘insider/outsider’ distinction through a combination of media tactics and community strategies. Despite attempts to avoid the ‘Swampy’ effect, the protest was still a depoliticalisation of the climate camps, framing the camps as a brand. In the drive to achieve front page coverage the objective of the movement is lost. Environmental activists may think in terms of front page reports but as empirical data shows, there needs to be a combination of media and a non-media strategy, online and off line, media tactics *and* political strategies.

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